



## LECTURE 3

### The Social Factors of Gender & Age

In all speech communities, the linguistic forms used by women and men contrast – to different degrees. There are other ways too in which the linguistic behavior of women and men, differs. It is claimed women are more linguistically polite than men, for instance, and that women and men emphasis different speech functions.

The focus here will be on evidence that women and men from the same speech community may use different linguistic forms.

First a brief comment on the meaning of the terms sex and gender in sociolinguistics. I have used the term gender rather sex because sex has come to refer to categories distinguished by biological characteristics, while gender is more appropriate for distinguishing people on the basis of their sociocultural behavior, including speech.

Gender differences in language are often just one aspect of more pervasive linguistic differences in the society reflecting social status or power differences. If a community is very hierarchical, for instance, and within each level of the hierarchy men are more powerful than women, then linguistic differences between the speech of women and men may be just one dimension of more extensive differences reflecting the social hierarchy as a whole.

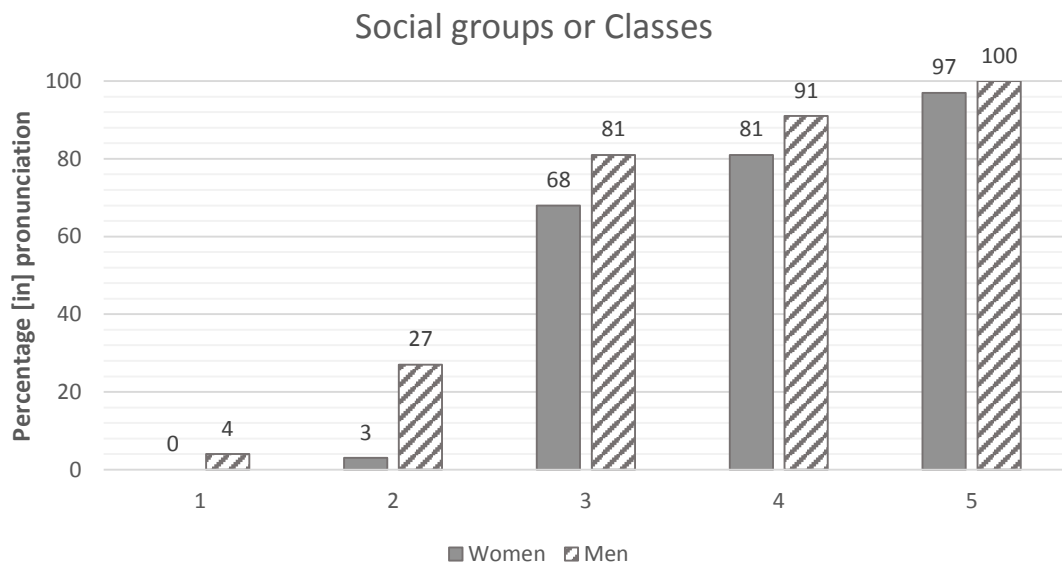
English pronouns, for example, do not reflect the gender of the speaker. The third person singular pronouns encode the gender of the referent, *i.e.*, *she* vs. *he* while in Arabic, the gender of the speaker is encoded.

## 1. Gender-Preferential Speech features

In Western urban communities where women’s and men’s social roles overlap, the speech forms they use also overlap. In other words, women and men do not use completely different forms. They use different quantities or frequencies of the same forms. In all the English-speaking cities where speech data has been collected, for instance, women use more – ing /ɪŋ/ pronunciations and fewer-in /ɪn/ pronunciations than men in words like swimming and typing.

In general, women tend to use more of the standard forms than men do, while men use more of the vernacular forms than women do.

Does the speech of women in one social class resemble that of women from different classes, or does it more closely resemble the speech of the men from their own social class. Trudgill (1983) tried to answer this complicated question in one of his studies:



In the lowest and the highest social groups the women’s speech is closer to that of the men in the same group than to that of women in other groups. In these groups, Class membership seems to be more important than gender identity. But this is not so true of women in group 2 their score (of 3 per cent) for vernacular forms is closer to that of women in group 1 than it is to that of men from their own group. This may indicate they identify more strongly with women from the next social group than with men from their own social group. Possible reasons for this are discussed below.

Across all social groups in western societies, women generally use more standard grammatical forms than men and so, correspondingly, men use more vernacular forms than women. In Detroit, for instance, multiple negation (e.g.), (I don't know nothing about it) a vernacular feature of speech, is more frequent in men's speech than in women's. This is true in every social group, but the difference is most dramatic in the second highest lower middle class, where the men's multiple negation score is 32 per cent compared to only 1 per cent for women. Even in the lowest social group, however, men use a third more instances of multiple negation than women (90vs 59per cent).

This pattern is typical for many grammatical features, in many speech communities, when women use more of a linguistic form than men, it is generally the standard form - the overtly prestigious form-that women favor. When men use a form more often than women, it is usually a vernacular form, one which is not admired overtly by the society as whole, and which is not cited as the "correct" form, this pattern has been found in western speech communities all over the world. It was described in 1983 by peter Trudgill, the sociolinguist, who collected the Norwich data, as 'the single most consistent finding to emerge from sociolinguistic studies over the past 20 years'

This widespread pattern is also evident from a very young age. It was first identified over thirty years ago in a study of American children's speech in a semi-rural New England village, where it was found that the boys used more/in/ and the girls more /in/ forms.

## 2. Explanations of women's linguistic behavior

Some linguists have suggested that women use more standard speech forms than men because they are more status-conscious than men. The claim is that women are more aware of the fact that the way they speak signals their social class background or social status in the community, standard speech forms are generally associated with high social status, and so, according to this explanation, women use more standard speech forms as a way of claiming such status.

A second explanation for the fact that women use more standard forms than men points to the way society tends to expect 'better' behavior from women than from men. Little boys are generally allowed more freedom than little girls. Misbehavior from boys is tolerated where girls are more quickly corrected. Following this argument, society expects women to speak more correctly and standardly than men, especially when they are serving as models for children's speech.

A third explanation which has been proposed for women's use of more standard forms is that people who are subordinate must be polite. Children are expected to be polite to adults.

Women as a subordinate group, it is argued, must avoid offending men – and so they must speak carefully and politely. In concluding the various motivations, factors that might intervene, it is worth noting that although gender generally interacts with other social factors, such as status, class, the role of the speaker in an interaction, and the (in) formality of the context, there are cases where the gender of the speaker seems to be the most influential factor accounting for speech patterns. In some communities, a woman's social status and her gender interact to reinforce differential speech in some communities a woman's status and her gender interact to reinforce differential speech patterns between women and men. In others, different factors modify one another to produce more complex patterns. But in a number of communities, for some linguistic forms, gender identity seems to be a primary factor accounting for speech variation. The gender of the speaker can override social class differences, for instance, in an accounting for speech, in these communities expressing masculine or feminine identity seems to be very important.

- **Age Factor**

One of the most obvious speech differences between women and men is in the pitch of their voices. Most people believe this difference develops at puberty.

This physical explanation is only part of the reason for gender differences in voice pitch, however, social and cultural factors contribute too, and Influence in public domains has been a male prerogative until relatively recently. The fact that women politicians, often have deeper voices than average may reflect the public's preference for voices with masculine associations in politics; or perhaps women politicians are using male models in order to gain acceptance in spheres previously dominated by males.

There are other features of people's speech which vary at different ages too. Not only pitch, but vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar can differentiate age groups. There are patterns which are appropriate for 10- year-olds or teenagers which disappear as they grow older. These are age graded patterns. Slang is an area of vocabulary which reflects a person's age. Current slang is the linguistic prerogative of young people and generally sounds odd in the mouth of an older person. It signals membership of a particular group.

Out-of date slang words like spiffing, topping, super , groovy and fab identify a British person as a member of the older generation as accurately as an old-fashioned RP pronunciation such as /o:fan/ for often.

By their teenage years most young people in English-speaking communities have developed an awareness of the significance of Standard English variants, though they may not choose to use them. A common age-related pattern for vernacular forms, such as the use of /in/ for standard /ɪŋ/, in *walking* or /d/ for /ð/ in *then*. These instances shows that they are high in childhood and adolescence, and then steadily reduce as people approach middle age when societal pressures to conform are greatest. Vernacular usage gradually increases again in old age as social pressures reduce, with people moving out of the workforce and into a more relaxed phase of their lives.

In other words, the model suggests that as people get older their speech becomes gradually more standard, and then later it becomes less standard and is once again characterized by vernacular forms.

Patterns for different speech communities may differ, but in general, in their middle years people are most likely to respond to the wider society's speech

norms by using fewer vernacular forms. Conversely, it is in the middle age that they tend to use more standard forms.

The use of standard or prestige forms between the ages of 30 and 55 when people experience maximum societal pressure to conform (Holmes, 2013, 159: 179)

In exploring the social factors of gender and age. Sociolinguists are trying to highlight the systematic rather than the idiosyncratic patterns of variation among these speech communities and what it reveals about them. (Mestherie, 2001)